Italy

Revisiting the Life and Intellectual Legacy of Primo Levi

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The author, anti-fascist partisan, and Nazi death camp survivor Primo Levi died on this day in 1987. His life and the cautious Enlightenment ideology he advanced in his work, Enzo Traverso writes, told the story of the twentieth century and its battles.

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It would be banal — and nevertheless true — to emphasize how much we miss the voice of Primo Levi today, in times of rising xenophobia, racism, and far-right movements, at a time in which public intellectuals have almost disappeared in Italy. But lamentation was never Primo Levi's style of thought, and is best avoided.

The destiny of classics is to be permanently reinterpreted, and Levi does not escape this. There are, however, certain misconceptions concerning his legacy. His relation to Enlightenment thought, his definition as a Jewish writer, and, last but not least, Levi's role as a literary witness of the Holocaust — a word he disliked and with which today he is completely identified — have been misconstrued in recent decades.

A Critical Enlightener

Over twenty years ago, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote *Remnants of Auschwitz*, a remarkable book built on a sort of posthumous dialogue with Primo Levi, notably through a rereading of his last essay, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986). Drawing on Levi, Agamben proposed a vision of the extermination camps as the secret law of Western civilization and the "naked life" of the deported (the "Muselmann") as the modern expression of its underlying paradigm, *homo sacer*.

By invoking Levi in this way, Agamben unwittingly encouraged the misconception that the author of *If This Is a Man* was somehow the forerunner of a radical break with the Enlightenment tradition. But, in fact, it was that very tradition that defined the philosophical horizons of Primo Levi. He may have pushed this tradition to its limits, almost putting it into question, but Primo Levi remained a critical enlightener, a writer for whom reality was a material, anthropological, cultural, and historical product rather than a linguistic construction or a semantic structure. In spite of their missed dialogue, he probably shared Jean Améry's stoic claim of a "positivist" spirit: the spirit of

somebody who believes in experience, who “clings to reality and its enunciation.”

If This Is a Man has become a fundamental link in the chain of an open discussion on the conflicted yet nonetheless vital relationship between memory and history.

Classicism and positivism are the pillars of Levi’s first books. *If This Is a Man* (1947) is shaped into the model of Dante’s *Inferno* — deportation as a fall into Hades, the camp with its circles, the inexhaustible variety of the pains inflicted on the inmates, and the great diversity of its characters, from his suffering comrades to the omnipotent torturers — whereas *The Truce* (1963) tells of his coming back to life: the journey that allowed him, after his liberation from Auschwitz in January 1945 and an interminable peregrination throughout Central Europe, to reach his home in Turin.

Besides Dante’s literary model, *If This Is a Man* reveals a second, fundamental source, which is a scientific paradigm: the legacy of a chemist who describes, orders, classifies, and scrutinizes the overwhelming experience endured in Auschwitz. The literary sensitivity of the writer and the analytical gaze of the chemist are the foundations of his entire work. The Nazi camps were for him an anthropological laboratory in which, besides the serial destruction of lives, the human condition revealed its extreme limits. Of this anthropological laboratory, Levi was first a fragment — what the Nazi lexicon called technically “a piece” (*stück*), i.e., a victim — and then a witness; even more than a witness: an analyst.

Witnesses always filter their experience through their own culture, select and interpret their recollections according to their own knowledge and questions. Witnesses ask themselves what is the meaning of their suffering, and their answers are neither unique nor immutable. In the eyes of Levi, the Holocaust remained a “black hole,” a definition borrowed from the language of natural sciences, but this mysterious abyss had to be explored, studied, and possibly understood. He explained — this is the legacy of his books — that it is impossible to investigate the Nazi camps without the testimony of the deportees. The point was not to add a touch of color or authenticity to a whole of facts clearly established; the point was to use an irreplaceable source for understanding the extermination camps, for penetrating both the phenomenology and the meaning of an experience that transcended the archival materials and whose evidence its architects had tried to erase. This is why *If This Is a Man* has become a fundamental link in the chain of an open discussion on the conflicted yet nonetheless vital relationship between memory and history.

Auschwitz remained a black box of understanding.

This posture reveals a form of rationalism that Levi had inherited from his scientific education, a rationalism that guided his career as a chemist and became a permanent feature of his mind. One of the lines describing the diagram that opens his personal anthology, *The Search for Roots*, reads “the salvation of understanding” (*la salvazione del capire*). It is marked by four names tracing, from

antiquity to the twentieth century, a scientific and rational canon that inspired his intellectual journey: Lucretius, Darwin, Bragg, and Clarke. As Levi stressed during his conversations with Tullio Regge, he was attached to a "romantic" vision of science: a science "with a human face," he said, that carried on the joyful explorations of the Renaissance and Enlightenment scholars, opposed to the lethal performances of instrumental reason. In his few science-fiction stories, he warned against Promethean — and totalitarian — projects for dominating nature and annihilating humankind by means of modern technology.

Primo Levi's work thus has to be put under a pre-Foucault lens, even if his definition of Auschwitz as "a gigantic biological and social experience" clearly suggests a definition of National Socialism as what Foucault called a biopolitical power. This is an example of how Levi reinterpreted and pushed to the limits the classical tradition from which he came.

It is interesting, from this point of view, to compare Levi with Jean Améry (Hans Mayer), the Austrian writer and critic and author of *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* who was also deported to Auschwitz (where he pretended to have met Levi). Améry too claimed the legacy of the Enlightenment, which he defined as a kind of *philosophia perennis*; he never denied his intellectual roots in the tradition of Austrian logical positivism; and he did not hesitate to defend Jean-Paul Sartre's humanism against the offensive of French structuralism, which he perceived as a betrayal. Interpreting history — as the structuralists did — as "a process without a subject" was nonsense, and the epistemological posture of Foucault, who stunningly proclaimed the "death" of subject, appeared to him as a provocation coming from "the most dangerous enemy of Enlightenment" (*der gefährlichste Gegenaufklärer*).

As staunch *Aufklärer* (enlighteners), Levi and Améry did not endorse irrationalism or mysticism, and certainly would not have subscribed to Elie Wiesel's famous sentence defining the Holocaust as an event "transcending history" — but a gap remained between explaining (*spiegare*; *erklären*) and understanding (*capire*; *verstehen*). Critical reason might explain Nazi violence and grasp its roots, describe its historical background and deconstruct its context, distinguish its steps and indicate its actors, analyze its internal logic and point out its peculiar combination of archaic mythology and rational modernity, a spiral resulting in complete destruction — but this is not yet understanding. All in all, Auschwitz remained, in their eyes, a black box of understanding: Levi defined it "a black hole" (*un buco nero*) and Améry "a dark riddle" (*einem finsteren Rätsel*).

Primo Levi c. 1960. (Wikimedia Commons)

The attempts to explain the Holocaust through a *Sonderweg* (special path) in which, from Luther to National Socialism, Germany would have deviated from the path of a supposed Western paradigm of modernity, were naive ways out, just like the Marxist efforts to grasp in the Nazi crimes sometimes an economic rationality and sometimes a symptom of a late capitalist "eclipse of reason." To the eyewitness, none of these explanations were satisfactory — none of them were able to resolve this

“black hole” or “dark riddle.”

This posture should not be confused with that later formulated by Claude Lanzmann, the filmmaker of *Shoah*, which often took a mystical, almost obscurantist slant. Neither Améry nor Levi posited the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust — *hier ist kein warum* (there is no why) — as a dogma that automatically stigmatized as “obscene” any attempt to historical understanding. Améry and Levi did not consider the Holocaust as a “non-realm of memory” (*non-lieu de mémoire*), a trauma that could only be resurrected by testimony but neither transmitted nor historicized. They never thought to celebrate a defeat of the intellect. Not only did such a mystical posture not correspond with their mental constitutions — they probably would have rejected it as both ethically and politically unacceptable.

Jewish Italian, Not Italian Jew

The second widespread misunderstanding of Primo Levi deals with his Jewishness: the tendency to classify him as a Jewish writer. Undoubtedly, Levi was a Jew. He never tried to hide this obvious fact: he had been persecuted and deported to Auschwitz as a Jew and spent most of his intellectual life bearing testimony to the Nazi extermination of the European Jews. Nonetheless, he was not a “Jewish writer” like Elie Wiesel, Aharon Appelfeld, or Philip Roth, to mention some of his contemporaries. The Italian-Jewish writers of the twentieth century deeply differed from their Israeli fellows, as well as from the New York intellectuals, however diverse the latter could be. Not only did he never consider himself the representative of a religious community — his attachment to the tradition of science and the Enlightenment implied a radical form of atheism, which his experience of deportation strongly reinforced, even if he always expressed respectful feelings toward believers — but he probably never felt part of a Jewish milieu with clearly defined social and cultural boundaries.

Rather than as an Italian Jew — a definition in which Jew is the substantive and Italian the adjective — he preferred to depict himself as an *italiano ebreo*, a “Jewish Italian.”

Whereas in Italy, as a Jew, he was a member of a minority, in Auschwitz his particularism was Italian, not Jewish.

Interviewed by Risa Sodi after his successful lecture tour of the United States in 1985, he stressed that in Italy the notion of “Jewish writer” was very difficult to define. There, he said, “I am known as a writer who, among other things, is Jewish,” whereas in the United States he felt “as if [he] had worn again the Star of David!” Of course, he was joking, but he wished to emphasize that his education and his cultural formation had not been particularly Jewish, and that most of his friends as well as the overwhelming majority of the Italian readers of his books were not Jewish. In a lecture given in 1982, he admitted that he had finally resigned himself to accept the label of “Jewish writer,” but “not immediately and not without reservations.” This remark could be extended to most Jewish writers of twentieth-century Italian literature, from Italo Svevo to Alberto Moravia, from Giorgio Bassani to Natalia Ginzburg, and many others.

Between 1938 and the end of the Second World War (i.e., between the promulgation of fascist racial

laws and his liberation from Auschwitz), Levi probably fit the famous Sartrian definition of the Jew: "The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew . . . for it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew." In a conversation with Ferdinando Camon, he mentioned his Jewishness as "a purely cultural fact." "If not for the racial laws and the concentration camp," he said, "I probably would no longer be a Jew, except for my last name. Instead this dual experience, the racial law and the concentration camp, stamped me the way you stamp a steel plate: at this point I am a Jew, they have sewn the star of David on me and not only on my clothes."

Levi certainly was a "Godless Jew" (*gottloser Jude*), as Peter Gay depicted Sigmund Freud, but he probably would not have inscribed himself into the noble gallery of those whom Isaac Deutscher called the "non-Jewish Jews" (i.e., the Jewish heretics). After the war, Primo Levi did not feel targeted by antisemitism and considered emancipation from religious alienation and obscurantism a legacy of the Enlightenment rather than a task of the present. He did not consider himself an iconoclast or a dissenter within Judaism. He simply was not a believer or a religious man.

Levi was a rooted writer, who needed a deep anchorage in a particular social, cultural, national, and even regional background in order to express the universality of his themes and messages.

In many articles and interviews, Levi repeatedly affirmed that his Italian roots shaped his way of writing — books such as *The Periodic Table* and *The Wrench* celebrate the Piedmontese Jewish culture and even the Piedmont dialect — but had to be projected into a broader world. Auschwitz was the paradoxical site where, as an Italian Jew, he discovered cosmopolitanism. One of the first chapters of *If This Is a Man* — significantly titled "Initiation" — depicts the camp as a Tower of Babel where people spoke dozens of languages and where the capacity to overcome these linguistic boundaries became a condition of survival. Like *The Truce*, the book offers an extraordinary gallery of characters belonging to different cultures, from Poles to Russians, from Ukrainians to Greeks, from Frenchmen to Germans, as well as to different social layers, but merged in a world in which all traditional cleavages and hierarchies were turned upside down. Whereas in Italy, as a Jew, he was a member of a minority, in Auschwitz his particularism was Italian, not Jewish.

In both *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*, his Italian origins become a prism through which he discovers and describes other cultures distant and unknown to him. This is true, first of all, for Yiddish culture, which appeared very strange, not to say exotic, to an Italian Jew. But he also reversed this gaze: in the eyes of a Russian or Polish Jew, the image of a Jew in a gondola or at the top of Vesuvius was just as exotic. Today, Auschwitz has become the locus par excellence of a *Western* memory of the Holocaust, but the world he described in such a colorful and sympathetic way is an Eastern Jewish, Slavonic, Yiddish, Central European, and Balkan world. And the richness of his books lies in this contrast. In Auschwitz, he learned of the existence of a national Jewry, with its own language and culture, made of traditions, practices, and rituals. His last novel, *If Not Now, When?* , is a saga of the Jewish resistance in Poland, experienced as a sort of national redemption. He was fascinated by this Judaism, a Judaism of which he had learned the history, celebrated the greatness, and mourned the destruction, but which was not his own.

Many of Levi's remarks in his last essay, The Drowned and the Saved, today sound like warnings against the dangers of this civil religion of the Holocaust.

Against the cliché portraying the modern Jewish intellectual as a figure of exile and extraterritoriality, Levi was a striking example of rootedness in a national society, language, and culture. We could almost speak of physical roots, if we simply recall the words with which he evoked his family house in Turin, where he was born on July 31, 1919, and where he committed suicide on April 11, 1987. Presenting himself as an "extreme example of sedentary life," he wrote that he had become encrusted in his apartment as seaweed "fixes itself on a stone, builds its shell and doesn't move any more for the rest of its life." He passionately described the streets, the river, and the surrounding mountains of Turin, as well as the austere and industrious character of its inhabitants. In 1976, he portrayed his town with the following words:

> I am very linked to my little fatherland (*patria*). I was born in Turin; all my ancestors were Piedmontese; in Turin I discovered my vocation, I studied at University, I have always lived, I have written and published my books with a publisher very rooted in this town despite its international reputation. I like this town, its dialect, its streets, its paving stones, its boulevards, its hills, its surrounding mountains I scaled when I was young; I like the highlander and country origins of its population.

In short, he was a *rooted* writer, who needed a deep anchorage in a particular social, cultural, national, and even regional background in order to express the universality of his themes and messages.

Maybe, he added, it was because of this remarkable rootedness that journey was the *topos* of so many of his books. Just as his melancholic Enlightenment was antithetical to the cult of science and conquering technology, his "sedentary life" was neither provincial nor nationalist. For him, science was not a blind, instrumental rationality, but rather a universal language inseparable from classical humanism (a category he never put into question, unlike postmodernists or structuralists); likewise, his Italian identity, both Jewish and Piedmontese, was able to enter into dialogue with any culture, just as how Faussone, the hero of *The Wrench*, traveled around the world to build bridges, barrages, and power plants.

Against the Memory Industry

Athird misunderstanding of Primo Levi's work deals with his role as a witness. After his death, he has been canonized as a witness par excellence of the Holocaust, and thus achieved the status of a paradigmatic victim — which he did not have during his life. He wrote most of his books at a time in which the Holocaust had not yet entered our common historical consciousness as a central event of the twentieth century or even, in broader terms, of Western civilization. When he published *If This Is a Man*, the word *Holocaust* did not exist for defining the Nazi extermination of the Jews, and, later, he pointed out that this word, etymologically meaning a sacrifice offered to the gods, was "inappropriate," "rhetorical," and, finally, "mistaken."

The survivors could witness their experience, a fragment of the historical event in which they had been involved, but their testimony did not reveal any transcendent truth. The 'drowned' who had been swallowed up by the gas chambers could not come back to bear witness. They, rather than the survivors, were the 'complete witnesses.'

The "memorial turn" in Western culture — the rise of memory as a central topic of public debates, the cultural industry, and academic scholarship — took place precisely in the middle of the 1980s. Its symbolic landmarks were successful works such as *Zakhor* by Josef Hayim Yerushalmi in the United States; *Realms of Memory*, the collective volumes edited by Pierre Nora, and *Shoah*, a nine-hour movie by Claude Lanzmann, in France; the so-called *Historikerstreit* around the Nazi past "that will not pass" in Germany; and *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi himself. Thus, Levi powerfully contributed to the emergence of memory in the public sphere, but this happened at the end of his life and most of his work should be located before this memorial turn. He observed this change with a critical eye — I would say with a certain skepticism — and felt unsettled by this metamorphosis in both the perception and the representation of the past, as his last, testimonial essay clearly shows.

Two features of this new era of commemorations are particularly significant: first, the transformation of the remembrance of the Holocaust into a sort of civil religion of the West and, second, its separation from the memory of anti-fascism, which had been a dominant memory for three decades in postwar Italy. The "civil religion" of the Holocaust aims at making sacred the foundational values of our democracies by commemorating the Jewish victims of National Socialism in a liturgical, institutionally ritualized way. It turns the survivors into iconic figures who witness violence and human suffering in their own bodies — in short, *homines sacri* in the opposite sense of Agamben's definition: not the ones permissible to kill but rather the selected ones to be commemorated.

Many of Levi's remarks in his last essay, *The Drowned and the Saved*, today sound like warnings against the dangers of this civil religion of the Holocaust. He always rejected the temptation to turn victims into heroes. He refused to present the survivors as the "best," those who put up the most relentless resistance to oppression. As he explained, his survival in Auschwitz was fortuitous, simply a matter of luck: the chemistry exam that spared him from being immediately selected for the gas chambers; the extra soup ration which he received daily from his friend Lorenzo Perrone; and his sickness, in January 1945, at the moment of the evacuation of the camp, which spared him the "death marches." Thus, he deliberately chose to write *If This Is a Man* by adopting "the calm and sober language of the witness, not the complaining voice of the victim, nor the angered tone of revenge."

Levi refused to judge and played his role as a witness with great humility: "The history of the Nazi camps has been written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, never fathomed them to the bottom. Those who did so did not return, or their capacity for observation was paralyzed by suffering and incomprehension." The survivors could witness their experience, a fragment of the historical event in which they had been involved, but their testimony did not reveal any transcendent truth. In other words, the "drowned" (*sommersi*) who had been swallowed up by the gas chambers could not come back to bear witness. They, rather than the survivors, were the "complete witnesses."

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, he wrote that the survivors were “not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority”; they were “those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they’re the ‘Muslims,’ the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.”

Levi’s claim of “the duty of memory” has been consecrated in our age of obsession for the past, but it was conceived of in a time of collective amnesia.

When Levi wrote about the ethical and political “duty of witnessing” carried out by the Holocaust survivors, this formula had not yet become a rhetorical ploy of the dominant discourse on memory. He stressed that the survivors not only *could* not, but *would* not forget, and wanted the world not to forget, because they felt forgetting to be the most dangerous threat. Overcoming the past (*die Bewältigung der Vergangenheit*): this catchword, Levi observed, “is a stereotype, a euphemism of today’s Germany, where it is universally understood as ‘redemption from Nazism.’”

When he wrote these words, in the middle of the 1960s, a Holocaust Memorial in the heart of Berlin was simply unthinkable. In Levi’s writings, memory never appears as a Hegelian overcoming of the contradictions of history; its function is cognitive, not allowing repair or reconciliation. We can learn from history, but the past cannot be redeemed. At best, recollections could fulfill a therapeutic function, as for writing *If This Is a Man*, an act he experienced as “the equivalent of Freud’s divan.” In short, Levi’s claim of “the duty of memory” has been consecrated in our age of obsession for the past, but it was conceived of in a time of collective amnesia. The “duty of memory” is not a timeless and universal principle; it needs to be understood historically.

Memory of the offense means facing some fundamental ethical issues, notably that of guilt — both individual and collective — and pardon. In the 1960s, historicizing National Socialism meant first of all turning the page or, according to the conventional formula, *Bewältigung der Vergangenheit* (coming to terms with the past). Améry sarcastically evoked this formula in the subtitle of his essay, *Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (Overcoming attempts by an overwhelmed). Reconciliation was an empty word if it did not mean the “resentment” of the victims on the one hand and, on the other hand, the “self-mistrust” (*Selbstmisstrauen*) of the offenders. Such a recognition of historical responsibility, inescapable even for the generation that came after the war, was the only premise for remaking history — that is, metaphorically turning back time — and “moralizing” it (*Moralisierung der Geschichte*).

Levi did not express a similar resentment. His obstinate trust in the virtues of human reason was the deepest source of his anthropological optimism. “To my short and tragic experience of being deported,” he wrote in 1976, “another one, more complex and longer, was superposed, that of writer and witness. The result was clearly positive, because such a past enriched and consolidated me. . . . Living, writing and meditating on my experience I have learnt a lot about men and their world.” Améry did not share this view and accused Levi of being a “forgiver” (*Vergeber*). Levi denied the allegation, but at the same time confessed that he could not share the Austrian-Belgian writer’s resentment.

Today, the civil religion of the Holocaust tends to depoliticize memory, focusing on innocent victims as objects of compassion. It has emerged from a radical break with anti-fascist memory, which focused on the celebration of fallen fighters rather than victims.

In the last pages of *The Truce*, Levi described the Germans he saw in Munich in October 1945 as a mass of “insolvent debtors,” and in his correspondence with Dr Ferdinand Meyer, one of the German chemists at the I. G. Farben laboratory of Buna-Monowitz in Auschwitz, he refused to “pardon” him: “I would like to help you come to terms with your past,” he wrote, “but I doubt that I am able.” Nevertheless, he accepted the principle of forgiveness.

To forgive and even love one’s enemies is possible, he wrote, “but only when they show unequivocal signs of repentance, in other words when they cease to be enemies.” Curiously, Levi did not quote the best-known and most controversial book on this subject, *Die Schuldfrage*, by the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who had tried to distinguish different aspects of German guilt (penal, political, personal, and metaphysical guilt). Like the German philosopher, however, he raised the problem of our *historical responsibility* for the past.

In short, Levi could not forgive his persecutors but did not share Améry’s resentment. Both of them recognized that they had been incapable of expressing joy when they were liberated from Auschwitz. But after this common admission, their paths diverged. According to Améry, Auschwitz’s violence had broken human beings’ faculty to communicate, making them strangers to the world. Levi, on the contrary, could still see, among the skeletal figures of the death camps, “a remote possibility of good.”

These debates of the postwar years on guilt and victimhood belong to a finished time, when the past legacy heavily burdened the present. Today, the civil religion of the Holocaust tends to depoliticize memory, focusing on innocent victims as objects of compassion. It has emerged from a radical break with anti-fascist memory, which focused on the celebration of fallen fighters rather than victims. Nor is it by accident that the rise of the Holocaust memory has corresponded with the decline of anti-fascist memory. In many of his writings, Levi distinguished between Jewish and political deportation. In his eyes, this difference should not be hidden or diminished, but neither should it be stressed as a dividing line. He had been deported as a Jew, but had been arrested as a partisan, and when he wrote *If This Is a Man* after coming back to Turin, he decided to publish some chapters in a small magazine of Piedmontese Resistance: *L’Amico del popolo*. In his view, Jewish and anti-fascist memories could only exist together, as twin memories.

Levi believed in the necessary search for truth, but he never preached truths; he rather tried to excavate them, to problematize them, by both recognizing their contradictions and exploring their darkest shadows.

In 1978, Levi wrote a short text for the Italian pavilion of the Auschwitz Museum, which is a strong defense of anti-fascism. In the last decades, this pavilion, commissioned by the National Association of Ex-Deportees and realized by a team of committed authors — the architect Ludovico di Belgiojoso, the composer Luigi Nono, and the painter Mario Samonà — had become a realm of memory of Italian anti-fascism. But it no longer fit the current standards of public memory and was finally closed.

Anti-fascism — a particular form of anti-fascism, made of a fusion of the critical Enlightenment and left-wing republicanism — was the political background of Primo Levi, but he never claimed the anti-fascist rhetoric of postwar Italy. His books share little with the epic and heroic tales of a resistance struggle for national liberation. In *The Drowned and the Saved,* he described himself as the worst of the partisans, lacking physical courage, experience, and political education, and he emphasized that his career as a partisan had been very "brief, painful, stupid and tragic: I had taken a role that was not mine."

The tragic legacy of his experience as a partisan is summarized in a handful of passages in *The Periodic Table*. Levi referred to an "ugly secret": the execution of two of his comrades accused of betrayal — something quite common in partisan warfare — that burdened his consciousness and destroyed him psychologically, depriving him of the necessary resources for carrying on the struggle.

Slipping into the Gray Area

In the last years of his life, which were punctuated by repeated and deepening depressions, Levi grew obsessed with the "gray zone," the area of indistinctness where the boundaries between persecutors and victims, good and evil, were blurred; an ambiguous space whose "incredibly complicated internal structure" hindered the faculty of judgment. It was in this period that he depicted the "Muselmann" — the dehumanized inmate, the embodiment of another intermediate area suspended between life and death — as the "complete witness" of the Nazi camps. Survivors were simply vicarious representatives of these "complete witnesses," who could not speak.

Levi warned against the birth of a paradoxical form of Israeli fascism.

Levi remained a melancholic enlightener, but his optimism had disappeared. He bore testimony without considering himself a "true witness," and defended anti-fascism in spite of portraying himself as a pitiful partisan. In short, he believed in the necessary search for truth, but he never preached truths; he rather tried to excavate them, to problematize them, by both recognizing their contradictions and exploring their darkest shadows.

This critical skepticism did not spare his Jewish identity and his role as a witness. In 1967, he took a position in defense of Israel, which he felt was threatened with destruction, defining it, in several interviews, as his "second homeland." In 1982, at the moment of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, he denounced this aggression and warned against the birth of a paradoxical form of Israeli fascism embodied by leaders such as Menachem Begin, whom he stigmatized as a disciple of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, an admirer of Mussolini. He knew that many of the

founders of Israel had been people who, like him, had survived the Holocaust, but could not come back to their homes. This was a matter of fact, but it did not immunize them nor Israel against fascism. This was another dimension of the gray zone.

In an interview in 1983, Primo Levi admitted his exhaustion. He no longer wished to meet pupils and students who repeated the same questions, but he also added that he was not satisfied by his own answers. He described having been deeply unsettled by a question asked by two adolescents in a school: “Why do you still come to tell us your story, forty years later, after Vietnam, the Stalin camps and Cambodia, after all this… Why?” He remained in front of them, voiceless, mouth agape, as a witness retreating back into himself. His convictions, his pedagogical talents and rhetorical skills, his long career of witnessing suddenly seemed useless in front of this simple question. He felt overwhelmed by shame, the human shame he had discovered in Auschwitz and which he met again translating Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*. The past is an inexhaustible receptacle of materials for literary creation, but, unfortunately, history is not a *magistra vitae*.

ENZO TRAVERSO

P.S.

• Jacobin. 04.11.2021:
https://jacobin.com/2021/04/primo-levi-enlightenment-holocaust-auschwitz-memory-italian-jewish-legacy

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